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Author(s): K. M. Briggs

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THE ENGLISH FAIRIES

BY K. M. BRIGGS

ALL fairy beliefs are extraordinarily complex, both in the variety of types of fairy, and, so far as one can learn, in the origin of the beliefs. This is particularly true of English fairylore, probably because we are racially so mixed. No single explanation seems to fit the whole subject. It is as if we were reading a detective story in which the crime turns out to have been committed not by one main criminal but by a number of fortuitous minor criminals, who has each unwittingly contributed to the main crime, and who have scattered clues about with bewildering profusion. This naturally outrages our sense of fitness and makes us feel as if the author was cheating.

Let us for the moment leave the vexed question of origins and examine the various types of fairy which exist in English fairylore.

In that excellent little handbook *Irish Fairy and Folk Tales* the poet Yeats made a useful classification of fairies which I adopted, with some modification, in a small popular book I wrote a little while ago, *The Personnel of Fairyland*. This classification does not claim to be scientific, but it is convenient for discussion because it is descriptive and begs no questions; it does not prematurely assume theories of origin, and though there is bound to be some overlapping between one class and another, I will, with your permission, use it for the present purpose.

The English fairies can be divided into these classes :

- I. The Trooping Fairies. These again may be subdivided into the heroic and the homely ;
- II. The Solitary Fairies, or Small Fairy Families ;
- III. The Tutelary Fairies ;
- IV. The Nature Fairies ;
- V. The Supernatural Hags, Monsters and Giants.

To these it would perhaps be right to add another class—the Magician of the type of Morgan le Fée, who may almost be said to have given the fairies their generic name.

The Heroic Fairies are the aristocracy of fairyland. They have as a rule a king and queen, and they pass their time in the manner of the medieval nobility. They hunt, they ride in procession, they sing and dance and revel and listen to music. The best example of them in

Britain is the Dana O'Shee of Ireland; and traces of the same type, rather wilder and more sombre, are to be found in Scotland—in *True Thomas*, for instance, and *Tamlane*. These are of human or more than human size. The survivals of their type are few in England, and are chiefly to be found in tales of *The Fairy Bride*, like that of *Wild Edric*, who had a ride of his own, and was to be seen in Shropshire as late as the nineteenth century (Burne and Jackson, *Shropshire Folk-lore*, p. 28). Most of the English courtly fairies are small in size, like those in Hunt's story of *The Miser and the Fairy Gump* and in Giraldus Cambrensis' *Elidor and the Golden Ball*. But we must remember that size is relative, that many fairies can alter their size as they please, and that these fairies though small were formidable.

The Homely Trooping Fairies are those most common in English tradition. They are an agricultural people, interested in domestic order. They vary in size from large to small, often at will. They are not above pilfering, and are alert to punish eavesdroppers and tell-tales and any who infringe their morality, but they are grateful for kindnesses, reward neatness, and are ready to lend to those in need.

The Solitary Fairies and Small Fairy Families may be but one aspect of the Trooping Fairies. They are solitary, self-supporting creatures, often haunting a particular spot, not domesticated to mankind like the brownies. The leprechauns and cluricans of Ireland belong to this type, and Habetrot, the spinning fairy of the Border Country. Those wandering strangers who test the kindness of travellers, like the Three Golden Heads, or the little Grey Man in *The Golden Goose*, may belong to this type. Some of them are more sinister, like Tom Tit Tot, or the Devil Terrytop, or that even more malevolent character Yallery Brown. Half-way between these and the Trooping Fairies are the Small Fairy Families—who fetch mortal midwives for their children and hang about at fairs pilfering. Cherry of Zennor's master was of this type.

The Tutelary Fairies are those which attach themselves to a human family, either as omen-bearers or as helpers. The banshee and the brownie are the exemplars of these two types, though all kinds of unlikely fairies will play the same part. Their favour is often precarious. You must beware of offending your brownie or he may turn into a boggart, and then woe betide you! I heard of such a case the other day. It was told me by a friend rather older than myself who passed her girlhood in Northumberland. When she was still a girl—this would be in the nineties of the last century—her mother used to take her to call on some old ladies who lived at Denton Hall near Newcastle. These old ladies would

often tell them of the silkie they had in the house. The silkie is the Northumbrian brownie. The old ladies were very fond of their silkie. It is true that she made it rather difficult to keep servants, but if they were in a strait she would do all sorts of kind things to help them, particularly cleaning grates and laying fires ready to light. They often said that they did not know how they would manage without her. There was something too about flowers, the details of which my informant does not quite remember. She thinks it was that the silkie left little bunches of flowers for them on the staircase. She dressed in grey silk, and they often met her, or were aware of her, on the stairs.

My friend left the place and the old ladies died. In the last war, however, she returned to Northumberland and found Denton Hall owned by another family of her acquaintance. They were not, she says, the kind of people to get on with fairies. At any rate they did not see the silkie, but the son of the house was so persecuted by intolerable bangings in his room that they did not stay in the place for long. It is plain that the brownie had become a boggart. I was interested to find Denton Hall described by Henderson in his *Folk-Lore in the Northern Counties* as haunted by a silkie.

Except for the mermaid and a few water sprites there are not a great many Nature Fairies left in England. Scotland has a kelpie in every lonely loch, glaistigs sheltering in rocks and bens, Shellycoatie and Nuckleavee haunting the sea coast, and the great figure of the Cailleach Bheur, the blue hag of Winter, roaming the bleak hills. A few of such sinister figures linger in the northern counties of England. Black Annis, who seems to be the equivalent of Cailleach Bheur, comes as far down as Leicestershire, and the north country rivers have their spirits, Peg o' Nell who haunts the Ribble, Peg Powler of the Tees and Jenny Greenteeth who lurks in stagnant pools. Awd Goggie and Churn-milk Peg, who guard green gooseberries and unripe nuts, seem rather nursery demons, but the Brown Man of the Muirs, the guardian of wild creatures and the enemy of huntsmen is a true nature spirit. In Devonshire too the small flower fairies seem to be of the same nature as the Scandinavian light elves.

The Supernatural Hags, Monsters and Giants might be divided into different categories, but they may all be described as what the country people call "frittenings", they are often made subjects of the same stories, and they have many characteristics in common. There is, however, a good deal of overlapping between this type and others. Witches, giants and devils have in common the habit of lifting and hurling stones

about, but this power is also possessed by unusual people like Arthur and Guinevere, who certainly come very near to being god-like fairies. Padfoots, brashes, barguests, brags and the like are often not unlike the boggart type of hobgoblin. In fact it is rather a puzzle in what category to place them. They often take animal forms and one might ally them to the worms and dragons which are part of the fauna of Fairyland; but these last have no power of shape-shifting, so that they are definitely less spiritual in type than the demon fairies.

Morgan le Fée occupies a peculiar position in our folklore. There seems little doubt that she was once Morgan the sea goddess, later euhemerised as a mortal queen with magical powers. In this character she was the predecessor of those witches and magicians who claimed to control the fairies, and lingered on into the seventeenth century. As a fairy she is something of a foreigner, and her kind are better represented in France and Italy. The fairy godmother of the sophisticated French tales which have had such an influence on our literary fairy-stories is probably descended from the Fatae of whom Fata Morgana was one.

These then are the main types of the fairies. Now for their characteristics, nature and habits.

Size and appearance are very variable. They are sometimes large, sometimes tiny, often of the size of the three-years' child, sometimes beautiful, like the Dana O'Shee or the Tylwyth Teg, sometimes hideous like the duergars of Northumberland or the spriggans of Cornwall. This variation may be partly due to their power of glamour, shape-shifting and casting illusions. Often the male fairies are hideous and the female beautiful, like the merrows of Ireland.

As to their span of life, occasionally fairies are said to be immortal, always very long-lived. They are often said to live very long but to perish on death, as having no souls, though they are sometimes thought capable of acquiring them. Sometimes they are held to be in a pendulous state between salvation and damnation, like mankind, sometimes already damned. Sometimes they are only compelled to pay a teind to Hell.

Fairyland is most commonly placed underground, though it is occasionally under water or on an invisible island. Isolated fairies and fairy families live in caves, stones, wells, bushes, woods, mines, ruins, houses and barns. The first appearance of fairyland is beautiful and pleasant, but this is often the effect of glamour, and a magic ointment which enables one to see things as they are will show it to be a desolate region, with an accumulation of rubbish as its treasure, and its delicious banquets withered toadstools and poisonous food. On the other hand the fairies

often feed on the essential goodness of mortal food which they steal away by magic.

This brings us to the fairy morality. To begin with there is no doubt that they are arrant thieves, and will take anything they desire which is not protected against them. They probably regard it as no more than their due, and mortals who pay a proper tribute to them are generally protected by this blackmail from inordinate fairy thefts. Even the good fairies are also dangerously amorous and have a tricky love of practical jokes. But setting these traits aside, the good fairies are on the whole lovers of virtue. Cleanliness, justice, kindness, chastity are virtues which they uphold and reward, and they have a particular hatred of greed. They reward not only by bestowing good fortune, prosperity, gifts of healing and such impalpable benefits, but by gifts of food, silver money and apparently worthless trifles, such as dead leaves or stones, which turn if kept into gold or jewels. Often too they give free loans or return their own borrowings with interest.

The fairies were often resorted to for their healing powers. Hob hole Hob of Runswick Bay, for instance, was accustomed to cure the whooping cough. The parents had only to take their children to the entrance of his cave and call out :

“Hobhole Hob! Hobhole Hob!
My bairn's got t'kincough.
Tak't off! Tak't off!”

and the job was as good as done. Unfortunately for the local children a grateful parent left him a present of clothes, with the usual result. So whooping cough is no longer so easily cured in that part of the world. A white powder was one of the most common of the fairy cures, and several times in the seventeenth century witch trials, the witches pleaded that they did their cures by means of a white powder given them by the fairies.

Wise though the fairies were in medical matters they were in some ways dependent upon human treatment. For instance the services of a mortal midwife were needed at a fairy birth, and human milk was of great benefit to a fairy baby. This seems to have been one of the main causes of the most dreaded activity of the fairies, their habit of stealing away human babies or nursing mothers. The children seem to have been changed for a double reason, both to recruit the fairy stock with a human admixture and to give the substituted changeling a chance of human nurture. The mothers were stolen away purely as nurses. The other class of person allured into fairyland was generally the musician or

dancer, who could help to minister to the fairy revels. There was another more sinister reason for kidnapping a mortal, and that was that he might pay the fairy teind to Hell. Apart from these classes human beings sometimes lived with fairies as servants by voluntary compact, though they did not always know that it was a fairy who was engaging them. The story of Cherry of Zennor is a case in point.

All the occupations common in a primitive community were open to the fairies. They hunted, danced and played. In Ireland they also fought and played shinty. They were herdsmen and agriculturists. Some of them strangely enough, when one thinks of their fear of cold iron, were skilled smiths. Shoemaking, spinning and weaving were among their special crafts, and they performed all domestic labours.

Their clothes were very varied. Often they wore those proper to their own countryside, though sometimes they were rather old-fashioned in their dressing. An old woman whose description of the fairies is mentioned by Hunt described them, however, as dressing in the height of the fashion, with a passion for high-heeled shoes which marked her cakes when they danced on them. Green is perhaps the most usual colour, and red caps are common, but some of the fairies both in Wales and the North of England wear white. Some of the Welsh fairies wear clothes rayed of green and yellow. Tartan is sometimes worn by the Highland fairies, and grey is occasionally worn, though most often by those that have some connection with ghosts. Brownies and other hobs are often very ragged and sometimes dressed in skins like the old lares.

It seems that fairies dealing with mortals have to observe certain taboos. Holy water and cold iron are dangerous to them, and many cannot even cross running water. The betrayal of their name is very dangerous to them and the mention of their origin is an insult. Nor can they accept clothes made by mortals. They are often banished by cock-crow, and they much dislike the sound of church bells, though they have small, tinkling bells of their own. You remember the Worcestershire fairy who had to leave because of the church bells, and complained so bitterly :

“ I can neither sleep nor lie,
Inkberrow's ting-tang hangs so high.”

Mortals dealing with fairies have to be equally careful. They must on no account taste food in fairyland unless they wish to remain there indefinitely. On the other hand fairy food outside fairyland is generally rather beneficial. It is very rash to attempt to steal fairy treasure, though this has been accomplished, often, however, with unfortunate

results. It is unwise to name the fairies, and indeed it is always best to keep a still tongue in your head. One should never betray fairy gifts or secrets. Holy names may be a defence, but to approach sanctity without the explicit word is dangerous. It is, for instance, tactless in the extreme to mention Sunday to a fairy.

Even the most malevolent fairies can be encountered with a resolute heart and proper safeguard. Indeed they are in some ways safer to encounter than a witch, whose humanity makes her insensitive to words and actions which have power over fairies. Sometimes, however, it takes a good deal of dexterity and presence of mind to escape. Falsehood must be avoided, and yet a direct answer is often dangerous. For instance if you are followed by a fuath it is often efficacious to describe the weapon you can use against her, but if you name it she can make it powerless. You can say with good effect, "I will unsheath against you the long thin, wavy-edged thing that glimmers blue in the moonlight," but if you say, "I will draw my sword," you will find yourself unable to do so. And with malignant fairies, as with the devil, you must avoid a direct refusal. It is important too to have the last word. The ballad of *Meet-on-the-Road* exemplifies the method to be pursued. I have sometimes thought that the game "Here comes an old sailor of Botany Bay" in which one must not say "Yes, no or nay, black, white or grey" may have been a precautionary practice for that kind of situation.

Tangible protections against fairies are a turned coat, an unsheathed knife, a sprig of rowan or elder (elder is sometimes a refuge for good fairies but a protection against bad fairies and witches), a crust of bread, the Bible, holy water, or, failing that, milk. Any of his father's garments will protect an unchristened baby from being carried off by the fairies, and a pair of opened shears hung over the cradle will do the same. Open shears or a self-bored stone hung over the stalls will prevent horses from being elf-ridden.

It is generally considered dangerous or unlucky to wear green, the fairies' colour, but I have recently come across a case in which green was considered a safeguard. I suppose it was propitiatory. It was a story told to a friend of mine on Islay by the postmaster of Portnahaven. He said he knew a man who had been withered by a fairy. He and his sister, when they were children, had been going along a lonely road by a loch when they met a little man. The sister was in green, and he let her pass, but he stretched out his hand and touched the boy's leg, and a lameness fell on him that has endured ever since. I have not, however, heard of green used as a defence except in the Highlands.

What can we deduce of the folk belief about fairies from these various traits? We must, of course, be cautious of pressing our inference too hard. One cannot expect exact logic from the folk, who generally take their beliefs and practices piecemeal as they find them. A number of people, and particularly those untrained in thinking, are capable of holding a good many conflicting and even contradictory beliefs in their minds at the same time without being conscious of any friction or discomfort.

One curious point seems to emerge, and that is that the fairies almost appear to owe their powers to spells rather than to their own nature. Take, for instance, the fairy ointment which plays so large a part in English fairy beliefs. The fairy babies no less than mortals need to have their eyes anointed with it. There is an occasional suggestion too that fairies owe their invisibility to carrying fern seed as any mortal might do, though generally fairies are visible only between one blink of an eye and the other. A possible explanation of this is that the fairies in need of magic are only half fairies, the child of one fairy and one mortal parent. This would also account for the necessity of mortal midwives. It would be equally natural that the mortal woman should need a nurse from her own world and that the half-bred fairies should need spells to give them full fairy powers. In the seventeenth century pamphlet of *The Pranks of Puck*, which seems to embody some ancient traditions, Robin Goodfellow has the tricksiness of the fairy nature from birth but needs to have his full powers conferred on him by his father, King Oberon.

John Fletcher had no very strong folk sense, but sometimes he embodied a true tradition, and he may have done so in the passage in *The Faithful Shepherdess* :

A vertuous well, about whose flowry banke
The nimble-footed Fairies dance their rounds,
By the pale moonshine, dipping oftentimes
Their stolen Children, so to make them free
From dying flesh and dull mortalitie.

Implicit in a good many of the folk stories is a strong connection between the fairies and the dead. It is explicit also in many of them. The Cauld Lad of Hilton, the Northumbrian silkies and many fairies of the hobgoblin type are expressly described as ghosts. The pisgies or pixies of Devon are sometimes called the ghosts of unbaptised children, Peg o' Nell is supposed to be the ghost of a maid-servant from Waddow Hall, the buccas of the Cornish mines are said to be the ghosts of the Jewish miners who worked there in the olden days. Visitors to fairy knolls,

too, often meet former friends supposed to be dead. Some of these have been carried into fairyland, but others have died under those circumstances which would qualify them to be ghosts, they have died in battle or at twilight or in some way before their allotted span was accomplished. Will o' the Wisps too are often said to be the spirits of unrighteous men, misers or those who have removed men's boundary marks.

It is always worth while to try to find out what people say about their own beliefs, though it is not wise to give them undoubted credence. The folk theories about fairy origins are almost as various as those put forward by folklorists.

Some regard fairies as fairies, with no more to be said about it.

The largest body of belief regards them as the dead, though generally as some special class of the dead.

Some regard them as fallen angels, not good enough for Heaven and too good for Hell. The educated men who wrote on fairies at the time when they were still believed in have several different theories to offer. The most usual and the most orthodox was that they were devils, as the gods of the Heathen had been. This derives ultimately from St. Augustine, but there was another theory with a derivation possibly as ancient, according to which they were a sort of spiritual animals, or separate beings of an astral order. This was probably founded on the charitable attitude of the Primitive Church towards pre-Christian beliefs, which is exemplified in the story of St. Anthony's meeting with the centaur and the satyr. Durant Hotham puts it prettily in his *Life of Jacob Behmen* (London, 1654, p. C2).

The Mole lives in his Hill, and the industrious Ant hath her little Cottage, higher than the surface of the Earth, and the bigger Mountains (whether thrown up by them I will not dispute) are the dwellings of other Creatures, some lodg'd there by confinement, or their own choice, others born and bred in the Earth, who delight in places abounding with strong Metalline and Minerall Vapours, both as suitable to their natures, and where the casual lying of the Rocky Ore makes handsome Caverns and Chambers for these darksom Guests. . . .

Nor is the Aery Region disfurnisht of its Inhabitant Spirits ; Some of the *Jewish* Rabbins say that (by) the creation of the Fowls of Heaven mentioned in *Genesis*, is understood not those only whose bodies we see, and catch, and feed upon, but that far more numerous Progeny of Aerial Spirits, lodg'd in Vehicles of a thinner-spun thred than is (otherwise than by condensation) visible to our dim sight.

The theory of fairies as ghosts had its supporters among the learned,

though this was rather hesitantly admitted in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as Protestant theology denied that the dead could walk until the Day of Judgement. We find the belief most clearly shown in those spells to raise the fairies which are scattered through the magical manuscripts of the period. In, for instance, the well-known spell of Elias Ashmole's to raise a fairy, Elibygathan is addressed as a Christian soul capable of salvation.

English fairy beliefs are less lively, less documented and less profuse than those of Scotland, Ireland and Wales. It would be no longer possible for a modern scholar to do what Evan Wentz did so successfully for the Fairy Faith of Celtic Countries. We are forced to rely to a great extent for our knowledge of English fairies on literary records, and some of them of great antiquity. This is a great pity, because English fairies have a peculiar and very charming flavour of their own. But we can only be thankful for the amount that has been observed and recorded, even though some of it needs a good deal of sifting.

In one way we may be said to have been lucky because in the greatest period of our literature fairylore, then fully alive, caught the fancy of the poets, and they preserved beliefs that might otherwise have perished. On the other hand the poetic invention employed naturally drew the fairies away from pure folklore and makes it necessary to examine the poets' fairies before we can pronounce what part of the material is literary and what traditional. Furthermore, as the writers drew away from folk tradition the fairies were increasingly weakened and sophisticated until at last we sank to Rosa Fyleman and Enid Blyton, and such prettiness. Nevertheless Shakespeare, Drayton and Herrick were true countrymen, and all that they say demands most careful attention.

Before we come to them may I very briefly recall to your minds a few of the earlier notices of fairies, those curiously convincing extracts from the early chronicles that almost compel a willing suspension of disbelief.

Ralph of Coggeshall's passage; *De quodam spiritu fantastico* raises several interesting points. This is a rough translation of it.

In the time of King Richard a fantastical spirit appeared at Dagworthy in Suffolk in the house of Sir Osberne de Bradwell. She often spoke with the family, imitating the voice of a child of one year old, and she called herself Malekin. She said that her mother and brother lived in a neighbouring house and that they often abused her because she forsook them to talk to human beings. She did and said many remarkable and laughable things and sometimes revealed hidden matters. The knight's wife and all his family were exceedingly terrified at first by her conversation, but becoming accustomed to her words and the comical things she did,

they talked to her confidently and familiarly, and asked her a great many questions. She generally talked in the local dialect, but occasionally even in Latin, and she would talk about the Scriptures to the knight's chaplain, or so the chaplain himself has told me. She could be heard and felt, but hardly ever seen except once when she appeared to one of the chamber maids in the shape of a very tiny child dressed in a kind of white tunic, and that not before the girl had begged and prayed her to show herself. She would only grant her request on the condition that the maid would swear neither to detain her nor to touch her. She said that she had been born at Laneham and her mother had taken her into the fields and had left her lying in one corner of the meadow while she went to eat with some neighbours. While she was lying thus alone she was snatched up and carried away by these others, and she had now been with them for seven years, and after seven more years she would be changed back, and could return to her former human habitation. . . . She would often demand food and drink from the servants, which was left for her on a certain shelf and disappeared from it.

(Radulphi de Coggeshall, *Chronicon Anglicanum*, p. 120.)

Here we have a domestic spirit half-way between the brownie and boggart types which were later to become familiar in this country. It is clothed in white instead of in rags, and is rather unusual as being a female one. Female brownies have been known, but it was more usual for the fairies to steal boy babies than girls. For this tiny, invisible fairy creature was a human soul which had been kidnapped from the harvest field, and which had only a term to serve in fairyland. In the meantime its mortal body was presumably occupied by a fairy.

Ralph of Coggeshall's story of the Green Children is too familiar to need recapitulation. The most notable points about it are their colour, their food—beans, the classic food of the dead—the underground country from which they came—called, by the way, St. Martin's Land, a name of some magical significance—and the wanton behaviour of the girl. But these green children seem to have had no supernatural powers, nor even any knowledge of spells.

The Portunes of Gervase of Tilbury deserve special mention because they are our earliest small fairy, about three inches high, tiny men with wrinkled faces who came into houses at night and roasted frogs for their suppers upon the hot embers of the fires. He tells us the earliest fairy midwife story too, about the Dracae. Giraldus Cambrensis gives us the most detailed early account of the fairies and also one of the most favourable.

"These men" [he says] "were of the smallest stature, but very well proportioned in their make; they were all of a fair complexion, with luxuriant hair falling over their shoulders, like that of women. They had

horses and greyhounds adapted to their size. They neither ate flesh nor fish, but lived on a milk diet, made up into messes with saffron. They never took an oath, for they detested nothing so much as lies. As often as they returned from out upper hemisphere, they reprobated our ambition, infidelities, and inconstancies; they had no form of public worship, being strict lovers and reverers, as it seemed, of truth."

(Giraldus Cambrensis, *Itinerary through Wales*.)

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries we come to a more sceptical and scientific attitude towards the fairies; and in the prose writings of seventeenth century in particular there was a real attempt to assess the belief and to discover if there was any true ground for it. Some of the recorded trials for cozenage show that there was still a good deal of credulity about the fairies among the uneducated people. On the whole one can say of this time that the educated people were incredulous, but country people still believed. Towards the end of the century, however, there was a curious reversion towards credulity on the subject among some at least of the learned.

Reginald Scot's contribution is too well known to need quotation. Already in the sixteenth century he was completely sceptical, and indeed believed that even the country people were the same. His fairies are mainly hobgoblins, with some references to the wanton and amorous fairies of the Irish Love-talker type, who are earlier mentioned by Chaucer.

Kirke, the fullest and most reliable of all the writers on the subject, is outside our scope, for he writes entirely of Scotland. In any case he really deserves a paper to himself.

After Kirke, Aubrey is the most reliable source of information. Many of the other writers rely rather on literature than tradition; Agricola's goblins of the mines, and quotations from Lavater and Olaus Magnus occur again and again in the writings of the period, but Aubrey recorded what he heard rather than what he read. Unfortunately his records are very scattered and unsystematic; the best of them, the account of Mr. Hart being pinched by the fairies, has entirely vanished out of his manuscripts. It was quoted by Halliwell Phillipps and all subsequent quotations appear to derive from this. In searching for it, however, I came across a fragmentary and partly defaced account of the fairies which is yet fairly comprehensive. It is to be found on page 257 of *Hypomenata Antiquaria A* (Bod. MS. Aubrey 3). The account is ascribed to old Ambrose Browne, 1645, and Aubrey apparently found Browne's handwriting illegible, as he has left spaces and rows of dots instead of some of the words.

"People were wont to please the Fairies, that they might do them no shrewd turns, by sweeping cleane the hearth, and setting a dish of fayre . . . halfe and add . . . bread whereon was set a . . . messe of milke sopt with white bread.

And on the morrow they should finde a groate of which the . . . if they should speak of it they should never . . . they would . . . churnes etc.

That the fairies could steale away young children and put others in their place verily believed of old women yet living.

The melancholy persons led away with the Fairies, as was a hinde going upon Hack-pin led a dance to the village, and so was a shepherd of Winterbourne-Basset, but never any afterwards enjoy themselves. The Shepherd said that (the Ground opened) he was brought into strange places underground that used musical instruments, viz. violls and lutes (such as were then played on)."

Hackpen is one of the hills in Wiltshire. Maddeningly fragmentary though this is, it contains a good deal of common fairy belief in a small compass. The preparation of the house for the fairies, the silver groat, the secrecy enjoined, the fairy changelings, the opening hillside, the music, and the melancholy of the people who have been with the fairies; all these are part of the fairy tradition in this country.

That the changeling belief was still active when Shakespeare was born, and in his own county too, we may learn from a little book published in 1639 called *Mount Tabor or Private Exercises of a Penitent Sinner*, by R. Willis, a Coventry man who was born in the same year as Shakespeare. It is a book full of pleasant passages, and among them is an experience which has rarely been told in the first person.

"When we are come to years we are commonly told of what befell us in our infancie, if the same were more than ordinary. Such an accident (by relation of others) befell me within a few daies after my birth, whilst my mother lay in of me being her second child, when I was taken out of the bed from her side, and by my suddein and fierce crying recovered again, being found sticking between the beds-head and the wall; and if I had not cryed in that manner as I did, our gossips had a conceit that I had been quite carried away by the Fairies they know not whither, and some elfe or changeling (as they call it) laid in my room."

One of the latest serious descriptions of fairies in English as distinct from Celtic literature is given by John Beaumont in his *Treatise of Spirits*, published in 1707. He not only believed in fairies but believed that he had been haunted and beset by them for several years. He saw them dancing in a round sometimes, in the traditional fairy manner, back to back. His description of their dressing is most unconventional and unlike any I have come across elsewhere.

"The two that constantly attended myself appear'd in Woman's Habit, they being of a Brown Complexion, and about Three Foot in Stature ; they had both black, loose Network Gowns, tyed with a Black Sash about their Middles, and within the Network appear'd a Gown of a Golden Colour, with somewhat of a Light striking through it ; their Heads were not drest with Topknots, but they had white Linnen Caps on, with Lace on them, about three Fingers breadth, and over it they had a Black loose Network Hood."

In creative literature the crown of our fairylore is, of course, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. It is not only supreme poetry, with an imaginative projection into another order of being, but it is true to the central tradition of English fairylore. The English folk stories as a whole are more kindly, more cheerful, less tragic than most others, more grotesque and less gruesome. We may have a Rawhead-and-Bloodybones, but not Nucleavee ; the wicked stepsister may have toads jumping out of her mouth and a skin covered with blotches, but she is not put into a barrel with nails hammered into it and rolled down a hill ; Mr. Fox may be cut into little pieces by the outraged company, but he is not broken on the wheel. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* reflects this mild and cheerful temper. The fairy revels in it are true revels, not the antic grinning of a mort's head, as Kirke puts it. These are nature fairies, but they are not the savage, lurking spirits of rocks and streams and lonely pools, but fairies whose concern is with the crops and the seasons, suitable to an agricultural people. Their hobgoblin is a village spirit, not a wild-wood one. Their small size is part of that English love of minuteness which makes models so popular in this country and which vents itself in such stories as "*I weat, You weat!*", *Skillywidden*, and *The Miser and the Fairy Gump*. But the small size of these fairies does not mean that they are to be despised. They can obviously change their size and shape at will. And though small they are formidable. They can travel round the world as quickly as the moon, they are masters of shape-shifting and glamour, and when they quarrel the seasons are thrown out of joint. The same belief still holds in Ireland, or did a hundred years back. The potato famine of 1846-7 was attributed to quarrels among the fairies. A labourer, old Thady Steel said, "Sure, we couldn't be any other way ; and I saw the good people, and hundreds beside me saw them fighting in the sky over Knock Ma and on towards Galway." (Evan Wentz, *Fairy-Faith in Celtic Countries*, p. 43.) In *Nymphidia* the charms of minuteness were too much for Drayton, and he left little other character to the fairies. It is an intrigue seen through a minifying glass. Yet when he turns aside from his main theme we can see that he knew a good deal of

fairylure. His description of hobgoblin is particularly revealing. From his time the fashion for minimizing grew, until the Duchess of Newcastle left nothing to her fairies except microscopic size. Our native fairies were falling into contempt, and by the end of the century the country was ready for that invasion of foreigners which has displaced Tom Tit Tot by Rumpelstilzkin and Tattercoats by Cinderella, so that the last stories we tell our children are their own native fairy tales.

We have seen that though there are some characteristics that most fairies have in common there are very wide variations of types, powers and temperaments. Yet these diverse fairies have been devoutly believed in for a great many centuries, and even now the belief in them dies hard. What are the origins of this lively faith? There are many varying suggestions, and good cases may be made out for most of them. Those that have most to support them seem to be that they are :

- I. The Dead ;
- II. Degenerated Gods, and, allied to them, Nature Spirits ;
- III. Lurking Remnants of Primitive Races ;
- IV. Human Beings acting as the witches' gods or devils.

To these we may add poltergeist manifestations and other inexplicable phenomena.

I. Professor Lewis Spence in one of his later books, *British Fairy Origins*, has made out a very strong case for the cult of the Dead as the sole origin. His four main arguments are these :

- (1) The universal mingling of ghost and fairy beliefs—for instance, the recognition of people supposed to be dead in fairy mounds, the dance of ghosts and fairies on Hallowe'en, the frequency with which hobgoblins and fairies generally are described as ghosts. To this we may add that the considered opinion of many of the most thoughtful of the folk is that the fairies are the dead, or a certain section of the dead.
- (2) The dependence of fairies on mortals, for example, the midwife and human foster-mother who are deemed so necessary.
- (3) The frequent small size of the fairies, resembling the popular conception of the human soul.
- (4) The taboos on eating fairy food, etc.

There are, however, it seems to me, one or two points to which he does not give enough weight. The first is that though he cites convincing instances of ghosts who have been regarded as supernatural beings he

does not make enough allowance for the contrary change by which ancient gods and goddesses are turned into ghosts, like Lady Howard with her coach, who seems to have superseded Hecla's Hell Wain, and Peg o' Nell, said to be a servant girl from Waddow Hall who was drowned in the Ribble, but almost certainly originally the river spirit. In a time when ghosts were firmly believed in and gods and goddesses were not it would be a natural piece of rationalization to account for the tradition of a god by calling it a ghost. Further, the spirit of a sacrificed victim goes to reinforce the god and therefore becomes merged with it. In the second place, I do not think he makes enough allowance for the actuality of the fairies who were associated with the witches in the witch trials, for the broad, braw-faced man who was the Fairy King and the stout woman in white who sat down by Alison Pierson's bed, or for the white powder given from a fairy hill, as described by Durant Hotham. Though the most explicit of these were in Scotland they are supported by the English cozenage cases.

He also dismisses Nature Spirits rather cavalierly, saying that mermaids are not fairies at all. Altogether I do not think we can accept the cult of the dead as the sole explanation of the fairy belief unless we postulate it as the root cause of all spiritual and religious beliefs.

II. An almost equally strong case can be made for the fairies as gods and Nature spirits. The argument of taboos and libations would serve for either. One of the strongest arguments for this case is the close association between the fairies and the Devil. The popular traits of the Devil, the horns and cloven hoof and shaggy hide, do not spring from Christian theology, but belong to folk gods or nature spirits. The early Christian missionaries, who had to deal with vast numbers of converts, adopted two methods with the beliefs and practices which they could not quite abolish. All that they felt capable of good they sanctified, building churches where temples had been, placing saints' days upon ancient heathen festivals and occasionally identifying gods with saints. All the gods that they felt incapable of sanctification they denounced as devils or demons, and they did this increasingly as the Church gained strength, and perhaps as they found the heathen practices incompatible for Christianity. By this policy the Devil acquired many of the characteristics of the heathen gods and nature spirits. The folk belief that yellow is an evil colour must, for instance, derive from the degradation of the sun-god into the devil, which makes the yellow-hammer be regarded as the devil's bird, lines the path to the Everlasting Bonfire with primroses and makes the yellow flag the Devil's flower in Newfoundland to this day.

It is unnecessary to labour this point ; corroborative instances will occur to all of you. In folk story and in literature alike the line between the devil and the hobgoblin is very lightly drawn. Often the same story is told about both, they behave in the same manner, and the same methods are necessary in dealing with them. Both are often at once cunning and stupid, and both are bound inexorably by their own spoken word. The Devil may be the Father of Lies, but it is impossible for him to speak a verbal untruth. Equivocation is the weapon of the fiend and the hobgoblin alike, and the defences against them are identical.

The water fairies are the most obvious of the remaining nature spirits, but when we compare the English pixies with the Scandinavian light elves, we see a trace of the ancient cosmology which divided the universe into various orders of being, gods, men, elves, dwarfs, giants, and monsters. Traces of this still linger in our folklore.

III. The theory that the small fairies derive from the memory of a conquered race of pigmy people, in our case the Picts, found its chief champion in Professor MacRitchie. He made a plausible case for it, but two arguments seem to weigh heavily against it. In the first place archaeologists have found no trace of a small people in these islands, and the Picts at any rate were certainly of normal size ; secondly, among the pigmy peoples themselves there are legends of tiny spirits, so that it seems to be a kind of psychological necessity to invent them. If, however, we are willing to jettison the small size of the conquered people the whole argument becomes much stronger. One or two of our stories seem to bear this out. The most striking is Campbell's tale of *The Woman of Peace and the Kettle*, which reads like an actual reminiscence. The best known is that of *Child Rowland*. Neither of these makes it necessary to suppose that the conquered people should be particularly small. I think we may say that although we can make no claim for a pigmy race we might allow that the aborigines of a land, with their superior knowledge of hidden ways through forest and marsh, and their preferential position with regard to the local gods and consequent control of the weather, might well be regarded as custodians of magical powers, and therefore, in the loose thinking of the Folk, as supernatural beings.

IV. A much stronger case can be made out for the survival of primitive cults than for the survival of primitive peoples. In these the spirit invoked and the priest invoking it may both have been finally regarded as fairies. There may have been quite late survivors of cults similar to that of the Priestesses of the Sena described by Pomponius Mela. The pagan equivalent of nunneries may well have existed in the woods of Britain far

on into Christian times. The fairy marriage of the Wild Edric type suggests such a sisterhood. Indeed, if Malory is to be believed, and a persistent tradition which continued to the seventeenth century, the Christian nunneries and monasteries may often have become centres of pagan cults. The last remnants of those practices would be in the witch cult, which—I say it with diffidence—seems to me to be as complex in its origin and as full of diverse residues as fairylore itself.

These are the probably historical foundations of fairy beliefs, but we must not entirely discount psychic phenomena as a contributory factor. The traditional behaviour of boggarts and mischievous hobgoblins is indistinguishable from what psychical researchers call “ poltergeist manifestations ” and seventeenth-century writers called “ demons ”. Pliny the Younger describes a haunting of this kind, and Ralph of Coggeshall's Malekin, the German Heinzelman, the Demon Drummer of Tedworth and the Wesley's Old Jeffrey all behaved in the same way. The phenomena are fairly constant. There is always knocking, almost always the throwing of stones and pebbles, oversetting of dishes, sometimes throwing of fire, clattering of china, rustling of silk, often a small, quick animal seen or felt. These go on with great violence, often dangerously for a time, and then die away. It nearly always seems to be necessary to have a child, an adolescent or a mental defective on the spot, probably undergoing some emotional disturbance. Sometimes the alarm may be traced to trickery, but this does not seem likely in every case. It is very possible that science, investigating telepathy and other psychological problems, may discover the natural foundation of these phenomena, but to our ancestors they could only seem the work of spirits or demons. The natural love of wonder would do the rest.

These then are the various factors which could contribute to the fairy belief as we know it. Taken separately each fails to account for something, but combined they seem to me to cover the ground. In a sense it is disappointing that one cannot rest fairy beliefs on any one foundation ; a neat solution is so satisfactory to our sense of logic. But too much neatness, however satisfactory, gives the lie to the complexity and intricacy of human life, and to the twisted strands of emotions, impulses, instincts and submerged reason which govern our simplest actions.